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An Internal EAP May Still Be Right for Your Organization

By John Pompe, Psy.D., SPHR; Jodi Jacobson Frey, PhD, LCSW-C, CEAP; Dave Sharar, PhD; Rachel Imboden, MSW; and Lauren Bloom, MPP

The first Employee Assistance Programs were not just workplace focused but also worksite located. Like HR, legal, and other departments, EAPs were almost exclusively internal programs, so they were staffed by company employees. Today, EAPs are often regarded as low-cost or benefit add-ons provided by external vendors. In fact, outsourcing is the norm, not the exception. While EAPs have become commonplace, more than doubling in the last two decades, the rates of internal and hybrid EAPs seem to be falling at a significant rate (Csiernik, 1999; Employee Assistance Programs, 2009).

- **External EAPs.** In terms of cost and efficiency, an external EAP makes perfect sense. External EAPs tend to be less expensive, and they are easier to buy and administer. Many employees are more comfortable seeking personal services away from the worksite. External EAP vendors have the capacity to offer greater counseling options, including 24/7 coverage and the ability to ensure services across vast geographical distances.

- **Internal EAPs.** Internal programs, conversely, are often favored by large companies, municipalities, educational and health care institutions, and organizations that are heavily regulated. Internal EAPs are thought to offer more customized services, rapid responses and insights into the organizational culture, and an impact on a more macro level across the organization as compared to an external provider. They are also typically preferred by HR professionals and share more supervisory referrals.

“Being flexible and adaptable to new roles, developing positive relationships, and playing the role of ‘customer servant’ were all critical factors in the success of the internal EAP manager and thus the internal EAP.”

- **Hybrid EAPs.** Internal-external “hybrid” EAPs are increasingly common. In this model, internal staffing is blended with the resources of an external vendor. In a hybrid EAP, work organizations may benefit from the advantages of both delivery models. When properly structured, hybrids are not significantly more expensive. There is some evidence that both internal and external program models may be equally effective in terms of workplace outcomes (Sharar, Pompe & Attridge, 2013). However, value often lies in the eye of the beholder. EAP purchasers are wise to carefully assess the needs of their organizations and seek the model that is ultimately the best fit.

**Managers Assess Internal EAPs**

There is no avoiding the trend that EAP purchasers are leaning toward the cheaper, easier solution, paradoxically, for some of their most vexing and expensive personnel risks. This begs the question: Why? Why have organizations invested in EAPs as valuable pieces of the HR puzzle only to, over time, downsize or even eliminate their internal EAP in favor of external or outsourced commercial products?

Certainly the hallmarks of the outsourcing trend apply: lower costs, ease of administration, lower risk, and more flexibility. But that’s only on the surface. In an effort to explore the downsizing and erosion of the internal EAP model, 29 current and former internal and hybrid EAP managers were interviewed using a combination of an online questionnaire and a recorded, transcribed, semi-structured discussion.
The managers represented current internal EAPs that were thriving and those that had been downsized, outsourced, or eliminated. The interviewees averaged 35 years’ experience delivering EAP in diverse industries. The intent of the study was to better understand these managers’ experiences and the circumstances where their programs thrived and faltered in hopes of educating other internal managers and the EAP industry as a whole. The study found consistencies in the accounts of the EAP managers that may be related to the success and also erosion of more robust investments in EAP.

**Hallmarks of Internal EAP Success**
A team of five researchers analyzed the interview data and agreed upon five consistent themes that were at the hallmark of successful internal and hybrid programs.

- **Effective organizational structure and change** was identified as an important factor in the success of the EAPs in this study. Organizational change in areas such as restructuring and mergers/acquisitions were identified as potentially destabilizing factors contributing to changes in the EAP model. However, preparation and carefully managing succession when an EAP manager leaves the workplace enhanced the long-term sustainability of an internal program.

  Not surprisingly, organizations prioritizing cost-cutting were commonly found downsizing their EAPs. Organizational placement within the benefits department is commonly believed to place internal EAPs at risk. But the study also revealed a complex relationship between EAP success and organizational structure. For instance, integrating EAP into other areas of the organization was found to enhance program sustainability.

- **Strong leadership support.** Having organizational leaders who strongly support the EAP was a significant factor bolstering the growth and sustainability of the internal programs. Such “EAP champions” often share experiences and personal anecdotes of the value of EAP, which strengthened the program. The risk, however, comes when leaders change and anecdotes fade over time or are not transferred to new decision makers. It is critical that internal EAP managers are able to build awareness or "sell" the EAP, develop relationships, and routinely demonstrate the value both they and the EAP bring.

- **Carefully considered model and program design.** Mutually beneficial relationships with EAP vendors; integrating or “hard-wiring” EAP into policies and procedures (e.g. HR, Medical, Security); customizing the EAP to meet the unique needs of the business; and EAP managers exercising autonomy over the selection of vendors were all seen as factors contributing to the success of the internal EAP.

- **Demonstrating the value of EAP** was also a pervasive theme throughout the interviews. Generally speaking, the successful EAPs are those that report the activity and impact of the program in a manner important to the organization. In some businesses, anecdote and personal relationships with leaders are key, while in others, data and outcome metrics are the most important determinant of EAP value.

  For the most part, anecdotes were favored over metrics to show EAP value, particularly when the...
anecdote involved EAP’s response to high profile critical events. However, most acknowledged that such anecdotes are a tenuous and fleeting method of showing EAP value. In other words, EAPs need both qualitative stories of success combined with quantitative demonstration of workplace impact.

- **EAP managers who understand the organizational culture** and offer programs culturally relevant to the workplace cut across all major themes. In a related point, EAP managers are often driven to innovate and address problems they see as critical. While innovation can be seen as valuable, the activities of the internal EAP must align with the demand and perceived role of the EAP in that particular organization.

Similarly, a subtheme was the business acumen of EAP managers, which related to the importance of the EAP manager’s ability to understand the organization, speak its language, and balance the role of EAP expert with that of general organizational leader.

Being flexible and adaptable to new roles, developing positive relationships, and playing the role of “customer servant” were all critical factors in the success of the internal EAP manager and thus the internal EAP. In many cases, the internal EAPs became as well known for the manager as the services. While this dynamic enhances the stability of the internal EAP in the short term, it leads to risk when there is turnover in the role of manager.

**Takeaways**

There are some critical takeaways for both internal EAP managers and the EA profession as a whole.

- **Consistent patterns and themes** appear to contribute to the success and decline of the internal EAP. Many of these themes are relevant to internal, hybrid, and commercial external EAPs. Further study is needed to fully understand these critical success factors.

- **No one size fits all.** The most successful EAPs are those that understand and adapt to the unique needs of the organizations they serve.

- **In some circumstances,** there is little EAP managers can do to avoid erosion of the program. The ability to sell EAP via data, anecdotes, and building executive “champions” of EAP are critical. EAPs need to be ready to perform and show their value, particularly during critical incident response.

- **EAPs should become part of the organization through strategic relationships and the integration of EAP practice into organizational policies and practices.**

- **The role of EAP manager and account manager is critical.** Playing the role of EAP expert is important, but so is managerial and business acumen. Developing positive relationships, selling the concept of EAP, and speaking about EAP in the language of the business all enhance the chances of the program’s success.

- **In some organizations,** internal/hybrid EAPs may be the preferred model. They can be implemented without significantly added costs and should be considered as a viable alternative.

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**References**

